

Stop » complaining: nurturing meaning in work

There needs to be a purpose that drives (or pulls) change so that it adds value. This often comes from the vision or mission. However, even a compelling vision or strategy may not be enough if we do not learn and grow from the change that accompanies it. Change for change's sake will not necessarily allow us to achieve our personal or collective aims. Reflect for a moment on the following assertion: you can change without growing but you can't grow without changing. Truly meaningful change must involve some kind of development. *Since organizational development cannot occur without personal development, government executives must be willing to embark on a path of self-discovery - especially if they want to lead public sector transformation effectively and with integrity.*

Adding to the complexity, government executives are being called upon to provide innovative leadership in the face of many formidable challenges, including escalating demands and declining resources. When one considers the pressing need to address the three Rs of contemporary public sector employment — retirement, recruitment and retention — it is not surprising that government executives would have some complaints about their work and workplace. Unfortunately, because they are role models and, for better or worse, reflections of their organizational group, such complaining can take a huge toll on everyone's ability to bring meaning and fulfillment to their work and achieve their highest potential.

Why is our ability to engage in transformational thinking so important and what can we do about it? Elaine Dundon, in her book, *The Seeds of Innovation*, demonstrates that core competencies (knowledge, skills, attitudes) in transformational thinking form the baseline for effective innovation to occur. Dundon underscores that without (a) seeking greater awareness of ourselves and others, (b) igniting and sustaining personal passion, and (c) taking meaningful action (referred to collectively as the seeds of transformational thinking), the corollary seeds of creative and strategic thinking cannot take root and flourish. As a consequence, there can be no innovation harvest no matter how creative the ideas being considered or how 'on strategy' these ideas may be. Those leading public sector innovation must continuously develop and employ their transformational thinking capabilities to fully real-

ize the return on innovation that everyone, including citizens, expects and deserves from government.

Let's return to the complaining issue and dig deeper into the roots of transformational thinking. **We have all met people who are unhappy or unsatisfied at work — at times that may even have been us.** As a leader and manager, you likely have dealt with situations that had serious morale and performance implications for your organization. Reflect now on how you tried to resolve your dilemma. What 'people-management' principle(s)

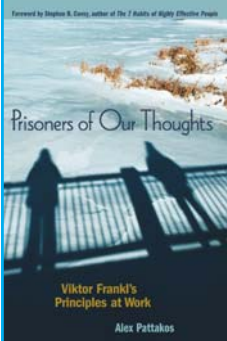
did you rely on as an antidote?

Meaning is one antidote. In the workplace, we can either choose to look for and find meaning or we can see our jobs as something outside our 'real' selves. If we choose the latter, we effectively cheat ourselves out of an enormous amount of life experience. Even if we think that we hate our jobs, by stopping long enough to connect inside and out, to our broader relationship to meaning, we can find rewards. The key question is: do we want to make such a meaning-full connection?



Alex Pattakos (left) with Viktor Frankl.

PRISONERS OF OUR THOUGHTS



By Alex Pattakos
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by Harvey Schachter

Viktor Frankl believed that each of us must answer the questions that life asks about the meaning of our lives. That belief was intensified by his experiences in a Nazi concentration camp, which showed that the human spirit could find meaning under the most grisly circumstances. He passed it on to others in *Man's Search For Meaning*, often called one of the ten most influential books of the 20th Century.

In *Prisoners of Our Thoughts*, Alex Pattakos has distilled Frankl's ideas into seven principles for the workplace. Pattakos warns that too many of us believe we are powerless to change life, thus locking us into a prison of our own thoughts — what Frankl called "our own inner concentration camp." To escape:

1. Exercise the freedom to choose your attitude: you can choose how to react to circumstances you face. When bad events happen, you can choose to think positively.
2. Realize your will to meaning: you have the power to make a conscious commitment to meaningful values and goals in your workplace.
3. Detect the meaning of life's moments: despite today's hectic pace, you can slow down enough to find the meaning in your activities. What is it you are contributing that is meaningful to others?
4. Don't work against yourself: when you become narrowly focused you can work against your own best interests. Instead, learn to work in synch with your needs and meaning.
5. Look at yourself from a distance: it is vital to seek a sense of self-detachment from your work. Lighten up. Stop sweating the small stuff. Gain new understanding through detachment.
6. Shift your focus of attention: Frankl learned in the concentration camp to deflect his attention away from painful situations to more appealing circumstances. Instead of wallowing in misfortune, move on.
7. Extend beyond yourself: ultimate meaning comes from serving others, which we can do by helping, displaying forgiveness, or showing thoughtfulness.

The book is essayish, mixing the experiences of the author and Frankl with philosophy and practical workplace ideas, as well as exercises to help you incorporate the ideas in your own life. Whether you're familiar with Frankl or not, it can help add meaning — and passion — to your life.



Psychiatrist Viktor Frankl, author of *Man's Search for Meaning*, espoused that the search for meaning is the primary motivation in life. Among the foundational building blocks of Frankl's existential philosophy and therapeutic system, known as 'Logotherapy,' is the commitment to meaningful values and goals — the will to meaning. He identified three categories of values that, when actualized, provide sources of authentic meaning:

- creative values, i.e., "by doing or creating something"
- experiential values, i.e., "by experiencing something or encountering someone"
- attitudinal values, i.e., "by choosing one's attitude toward suffering."

From Frankl's perspective, our first task, then, is to stop complaining! If we are honest, we know the pleasure that comes from finding something or someone to complain about at work. This can feel momentarily satisfying, but ultimately it undermines the integrity of our experience. It takes the meaning out of our work and out of our relationship to our work. It also affects those around us — consider whether the complaints of others elevate and motivate you or not. This doesn't mean that it's not necessary to complain once in awhile, perhaps even to whine and groan. What it means is that we need to be aware (one of Dundon's seeds of transformational thinking that are necessary for innovation) of when and why we are complaining. Is it to right a wrong? To bring about a simple moment of relief? Or have we started to define our work by habitually negative perceptions?

Complaining about our jobs might offer a moment of camaraderie but it doesn't nurture meaning, for us or for others. The idea that work is neither fun nor fulfilling, nor should it be, takes a huge toll.

When we make complaining a habit, we make meaninglessness a habit. Before long, we are so invested in our complaining that all opportunity to experience work as a rich part of our lives vanishes. So, from now on, ask yourself why you complain and, perhaps more important, what's the payoff from your complaining.

The great complaint carnival is not a celebration; it is a bandwagon of misery. Our complaints trivialize our experience — both at work and in our personal lives. When we complain, we disconnect. When we complain, we hold whatever or whoever we're complaining about as a shield between us. We perpetuate victimization and helplessness.

But when we take the time to communicate about our fears and insecurities, our real lives, we connect on a deeper, authentic level. When we connect through this deeper humanness, we create a community of support and possibility.

When we stop long enough to make this kind of authentic connection, we can't avoid meaning. It's waiting for us around every water cooler, in every elevator, office, and conference room. When we miss the meaning in our work life, we miss the life in our work. And when we miss the life in our work, we can't help but become a "prisoner of our thoughts", confined, as Frankl would say, within our own inner concentration camp. Sadly, by doing so, we effectively lock ourselves away, albeit unconsciously, from the prospects of realizing our capacity for authentic leadership and meaningful innovation.

Only when we know meaning in our lives can we know meaning in our work. Our will to meaning, not our will to pleasure or our will to power, is what illuminates our lives with true freedom. In the final analysis, we are free to choose our responses to everything that happens in our lives. When we bring meaning to our work, we bring the possibility of meaningful change to our work and workplace.

And isn't that what leading and innovating are really all about?

Alex Pattakos, Ph.D., is the author of *Prisoners of Our Thoughts: Viktor Frankl's Principles at Work*. He is a personal coach working with executives, athletes and celebrities to help them find deeper meaning in their work and everyday lives. He also consults on innovation (alex@prisonersofourthoughts.com or www.prisonersofourthoughts.com).